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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2782
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001077

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/17/2019
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL I2
SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS' RIGHTS DEFENDERS WORRY GOI CLAMPING DOWN ON MEDIA

Classified By: PMIN Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) In the wake of the brouhaha over senior GOI security official Maj. Gen. Qassim Ata's April 13 threat to close the Baghdad office of the pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat and to shut down Sunni satellite channel Al-Sharqiyah (in response to allegations that he had issued orders to arrest ex-detainees released by the US), advocates for journalists' rights are concerned the GOI is trying to reassert control of Iraqi media through intimidation and implementation of Baath-era laws. Ata has filed a lawsuit against Al-Hayat and Al-Sharqiyah, contending the two outlets falsely quoted him as saying the GOI would re-arrest detainees released by MNF-I. Both outlets also reported receiving threatening telephone calls, but the general denies anyone made such threats. Al-Hayat has since retracted its report about detainees and published a correction on its website. By contrast, Sharqiyah TV, which has a large audience here, has questionable motives, has not retracted its initial report and attacked General Ata personally, according to contacts who work on press freedom issues here. Ata has also brought a defamation suit against Al-Sharqiyah TV. Ata reportedly filed the lawsuit at the direction of the Prime Minister's Media Advisor, Yassin Majid. It is not clear at this point if the lawsuit is part of a wider GOI campaign to muzzle the Iraqi media. The media activists pleaded for stronger USG support -- moral if not financial -- to counter what they call growing GOI authoritarianism with regard to media freedom. It is not clear if the top levels of the Iraqi government are actively trying to restrain press freedom or just set an example to make the often sloppy or politically motivated Iraqi media be more accurate in its reporting. A strong indication will be the press laws that are reportedly being prepared for eventual presentation to the Parliament.
End summary.

Iraqi Media Under Attack

¶2. (C) In an April 16 meeting with Emboffs, Ibrahim Al-Sarraj, head of the Iraqi Journalists' Rights Defense Association (IRJDA), Bashar Manadalawy, deputy head of the Journalists Freedom Organization (JFO) and Kadhim Al-Rikabi, Program Manager for the International Research and Exchange Board's (IREX, a DRL-grantee) Supporting Independent Media in Iraq (SIMI) program, recounted the background of an apparent GOI attempt to rein in the media. Al-Sarraj said Baghdad Operations Spokesman Maj. Gen Qassim Ata called him April 14 (a day after Ata announced the lawsuit against Al-Hayat and Al-Sharqiyah) to deny allegations that he (Ata) had called the offices of al-Hayat and Al-Sharqiyah and issued death threats against their staff. Maj. Gen. Ata also informed an MNF-I CJ-9 advisor that he made no such threats.

¶3. (U) Indeed, on April 13, Al-Sharqiyah's evening newscast had reported that its reporters and staff had received death threats from Baghdad Operations Spokesman Qassim Ata.

Al-Sharqiyah said it was considering closing its Baghdad offices because of the alleged threats, that it held Ata responsible for the safety of its journalists, and called on the GOI to take a stand on journalists who receive death threats for citing a newspaper report. (Note: Al-Sharqiyah apparently picked up the story about the GOI re-arresting released MNF-I detainees from Al-Hayat, but the story was reportedly also printed by other papers, none of which are implicated in the controversy or lawsuit. End note.)

Al-Sharqiyah went further, calling Ata "Baghdad's liar," and QAl-Sharqiyah went further, calling Ata "Baghdad's liar," and accused him of "insulting Iraqis, stirring sedition, and promoting sectarian discrimination."

¶4. (C) On April 14, an MNF-I CJ-9 advisor visited Ata and discussed the lawsuit demanding the closure of Al-Hayat and Al-Sharqiyah, which apparently was approved not by Ata, but by PM al-Maliki's Media Advisor Yassin Majid. Ata stated he would make no further public comments on Al-Sharqiyah's allegations about him and said he would allow the court to adjudicate the matter. Ata has already met with the judge to present his side of the story.

¶5. (C) Al-Hayat's editor called Al-Sarraj on April 15, saying its staff had left its Baghdad office fearing for their lives. Al-Sarraj told the editor that the case would be pursued through the courts. According to Al-Sarraj, Ata's lawsuit against Al-Sharqiyah and Al-Hayat could be based on a law dating from the Baath era, since no new press laws have been passed since then. Specifically, certain articles of Law 111 in the 1969 Iraqi Penal Code regulate the media and prohibit insulting or slandering government officials.

(Note: CPA Order No. 7, as modified by Order No. 100,

BAGHDAD 00001077 002.2 OF 002

requires written permission from the Prime Minister or his designee in order to prosecute cases against the media or for crimes relating to insulting a public official. End note.)

¶6. (C) Al-Sarraj noted that Al-Hayat had retracted its report of its interview with Ata, which the newspaper attributed to a reporter's error, stating that rather than re-arrest detainees Ata in fact stated that he would "review the files" of such detainees. Al-Sharqiyah, however, broadcast the same story, provocatively accused Ata of being a Baathist, and questioned his professional qualifications and tribal affiliation.

Iraqi Media Exacerbating Problems?

¶7. (C) IREX Director Al-Rikabi noted two main problems with the Iraqi media: first, Iraqi journalists are not always professional, and secondly, the media tends to personalize issues, as demonstrated by Al-Sharqiyah's provocative statements about Ata. According to Al-Rikabi, Al-Sharqiyah's director has openly said that "whoever pays, has his say in my station," adding that it is well-known that Al-Sharqiyah receives funding from Saudi Arabia. Al-Rikabi suggested that Al-Sharqiyah's current problems may be due to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's refusal to meet privately with Prime Minister al-Maliki during the March 2009 Arab League Summit in Doha.

GOI Attempting To Co-opt or Strongarm Iraqi Journalists?

¶8. (C) Al-Rikabi commented that the Iraqi media enjoyed great freedom after 2003 during the CPA era, but now the GOI is eroding that freedom by manipulating legislation and journalists. For example, the GOI is stalling on approving four draft laws which would regulate the media while also protecting journalists and press freedom; the GOI aims to merge them into one law which would consolidate government control over the media. Furthermore, the GOI wants to perpetuate the former regime's Iraqi Journalists Association

by offering journalists and media organizations incentives to join, such as a guaranteed salary or land.

¶9. (C) The JFO's Al-Mandalawy fears independent organizations such as the IJRDA and JFO will gradually disappear and pleaded for "political support" from the Embassy. (Note: In addition to DRL's support to IREX/SIMI, Embassy PA has made several grants to the JFO for journalist training and advocacy projects in order to build the organization's capacity to promote the profession and advocate for a free press. End note.) Al-Mandalawy claimed the GOI is manipulating journalists with job promises if they agree to work for a GOI-controlled media entity. IRJDA's Al-Sarraj said that he does not feel the U.S. pays sufficient attention to media freedom in Iraq and pointed out that the media in Iraq wields great influence over people. For example, he said, the poorest Iraqis, who may not even be able to afford chairs in their homes, still own a television.

¶10. (C) Al-Sarraj believes the U.S. has a responsibility to protect media freedom in Iraq and should exercise its influence with the GOI to halt the "backslide" to the pre-2003 days. Emboffs discussed USG support for their aspirations, reaffirming that press freedom is indeed a top USG priority, as support for their organizations attests.

Comment

¶11. (C) Journalists face obstacles doing their work here on top of the security problems they confront. Last week Iraqi police detained a TV journalist for five hours when he tried to cover a small demonstration in West Baghdad, according to Qto cover a small demonstration in West Baghdad, according to media reports. He was released after the TV station director talked to the district police chief. It is not clear if the top levels of the Iraqi government are actively trying to restrain press freedom or just set an example to make the often sloppy or politically motivated Iraqi media be more accurate in its reporting. A strong indication will be the press laws that are reportedly being prepared for eventual presentation to the Parliament.

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